

THE UNITED STATES MILITARY AND  
THE WAR ON DRUGS

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## THE UNITED STATES MILITARY AND THE WAR ON DRUGS

### *Introduction*

The end of the Cold War has brought wrenching changes to the U.S. Armed Forces. At a time when declining budgets and building down are the order of the day, there is one area where the military's role is actually growing: the war on drugs. This paper examines how the military is coping with this new mission, including issues such as organization and operations, and it assesses some of the numerous constraints and pitfalls facing the military as it moves into this unconventional field.

### *Background*

With conventional methods unable to check the spread of drugs in the United States in the 1980s, calls were heard from many quarters, most notably from Congress, for the Armed Forces to take a direct role. Military leaders--led by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Crowe--balked, however, arguing that narcotics control was properly a law enforcement matter and warning that it would be a distraction from the Armed Forces' primary roles. The Reagan Administration initially sustained this reluctance, and Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci's opposition to wider military involvement was termed "Carlucci's trench."

In the face of continued failure to curb the growing drug problem, however, the military's involvement became inevitable.

By the end of President Reagan's second term, he declared war on drugs and Congress passed legislation assigning to the Department of Defense primary responsibility for the "detection and monitoring" of the aerial and maritime transit of illicit narcotics into the United States. President George Bush built upon this policy after taking office in 1989; that fall, he declared drug abuse to be the greatest domestic problem facing the United States and a threat to national security. Immediately thereafter, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney announced:

"The detection and countering of the production, trafficking, and use of illegal drugs is a high priority national security mission of the Department of Defense."<sup>1</sup>

To wage this new war, Cheney charged major military commanders with responsibilities in the hemisphere to draft plans for how they could contribute to the counter-drug effort. Since that time, the Pentagon's drug-war budget has tripled, from \$439 million to \$1.2 billion.<sup>2</sup>

There is a solid rationale for involving the military in the drug war. The military has a multitude of resources available that can be utilized. Through its assets in the National Foreign Intelligence program--e.g., satellites and aircraft capable of signal intelligence and imagery--and a multitude of systems in the Tactical Intelligence and Related Activities (TIARA) program, the military can gather a wealth of information otherwise

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Defense News Release No. 461-90, 18 Sep. 1990.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Lane with Douglas Waller, Brook Larmer and Peter Katel, "The Newest War," *Newsweek*, 6 Jan. 1992: 19.

unavailable on drug trafficking. The military similarly has extensive resources--planes, helicopters, and ships--that can be used to support counter-narcotics efforts. Members of the military also have technical skills and expertise needed to provide the military and police of cooperating nations with equipment and training used to combat drugs. In addition, the military possesses a vast reservoir of manpower; in fact, it dwarfs the relevant law enforcement agencies.

### *Constraints*

By 1990, the U.S. military was bringing its extensive resources to bear in the counter-narcotics effort, but not without considerable difficulties. One issue was the very nature of the war and the definition of the military's mission. In a 1992 statement before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics Matters (INM) Melvyn Levitsky noted the peculiar character of the counter-narcotics campaign:

"The 'war on drugs' is a metaphor, and while there are battles and casualties, the nature of the conflict is not a straightforward, stand-up fight like Desert Storm. There are no frontiers and no fronts in this war. The 'enemy' is not in uniform, and he does not fight in formations. The nature of the threat is indirect and underground. The trafficker fights his battles with subversion, terror, bribery, intimidation, and subterfuge."<sup>3</sup>

It is axiomatic that when undertaking an operation, a

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<sup>3</sup>Melvyn Levitsky, "Progress in the International War Against Illicit Drugs," *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, 2 March 1992: 160.

military organization should be assigned a clear and attainable mission. In the war on drugs, this has not been the case. The national objective is to curb the consumption of illegal drugs. The military's role has been to work on the supply side; its task is to help reduce the flow of drugs into the United States, making them less available and forcing up the price.

Rather than having a precise, attainable mission, however, the military has been handed an open-ended task, and one in which there are no clear measures of effectiveness to indicate how well it is fulfilling the objective. In conventional combat, a commander can plan a campaign to capture terrain or to destroy an opposing army, and he knows when he has accomplished his mission. Unfortunately, equally valid measures of effectiveness are absent in the drug war. Commanders are compelled to fall back on statistics such as the number of traffickers arrested or the tonnage of narcotics seized to demonstrate their success. In truth, however, this approach is analogous to the "body count" statistics brandished during the Vietnam war; the numbers simply are not in and of themselves relevant to the bigger question of whether the military's operations are reducing the use of drugs in America. In another manifestation of this problem, commanders often produce "effort" statistics--e.g., number of man-hours dedicated, number of sorties flown, etc.--to validate their operations, but these figures are equally extraneous.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Peter R. Andreas, Eva C. Bertram, Morris J. Blackman, and Kenneth E. Sharpe, "Dead-End Drug Wars," *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1991: 112.

The problems of a nebulous mission and a lack of meaningful measures of effectiveness exacerbate the interaction between the military and civilian agencies. In the drug war, the military does not have the overall lead. Even its Congressionally-mandated role of "detecting and monitoring" traffickers only serves to support those civilian agencies empowered to actually interdict and apprehend traffickers. The military's job is to support a multitude of agencies ranging from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and U.S. Customs to the Border Patrol and State/INM. In explaining to the Senate the function of the military and why the Administration did not wish to militarize the drug war, Assistant Secretary Levitsky stated:

"We have involved the U.S. military in supporting roles to provide sophisticated assets for detection and monitoring, transport, training, and delivery of military assistance hardware and in providing communications, logistical, and intelligence expertise to U.S. missions abroad."<sup>5</sup> [Emphasis added.]

Not only does the military not have a clear mission, it finds itself working to support agencies whose own goals are equally ill-defined and who are equally lacking in meaningful measures of effectiveness. While institutional politics and friction (read: turf battles) can be expected in any such arrangement, the drug war presents a unique set of thorny issues. The traditional measures of effectiveness in law enforcement agencies such as the DEA at the personal, operational, and institutional levels are centered on successful handling of

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<sup>5</sup>Levitsky: 161.

cases--i.e., the number of arrests and prosecutions, the amount of drugs seized, etc. Making busts is how individuals advance their careers, how programs win support from headquarters, and how institutions justify their funding in the yearly budget battles with Congress. As noted above, however, there is no direct correlation between these statistics and the broader object of reducing drug usage.<sup>6</sup>

Deterrence should be a highly-valued objective in the drug war, since an individual or operation that deters a drug trafficker may be as effective--or even more effective--than one that apprehends a trafficker. A military radar site in the Dominican Republic, for example, that deters drug planes from flying in Dominican airspace effectively denies that airspace to traffickers. According to the prevalent measures of effectiveness of law enforcement agencies, however, since the radar site is not yielding arrests, it is not significantly contributing to the overall effort. Similarly, military exercises along the U.S. border with Mexico might discourage smugglers from using that particular terrain, but since they do not result in apprehensions, they are not encouraged by law enforcement agencies.

A distinct problem for the military deals with the legal constraints under which it must operate. Under the 1878 Posse Comitatus Act, active-duty service members or reservists are

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<sup>6</sup>Craig L. Carlson, "Measures of Effectiveness--The Key to a Successful National Drug Control Strategy," *Military Review*, August 1991: 90-91.

prohibited from performing law enforcement functions of search, seizure, or arrest. Thus, the military must take care to prevent its members from coming in direct contact with drug traffickers; they can assist agencies with law enforcement roles such as DEA and the Coast Guard, but they cannot act as law enforcement officers themselves. Although Congress can amend the law or make a special exception in the case of narcotics, it has not done so yet, and there are no indications that it is contemplating such action. (Note: The National Guard, by virtue of its status as a state militia, is not subject to this law and perform assignments active duty and reservist members of the Armed Forces cannot. For example, National Guardsmen have been used to augment Customs agents in inspecting containers arriving from cocaine-producing countries and transit points, resulting in a three-fold increase in such inspections.)<sup>7</sup>

### *Organization*

Conventional military wisdom dictates that there be one commander in charge of an operation. The system cobbled together to fight the drug war is a command and control nightmare, however. Over a half dozen major unified and specified commands are involved:

-- Southern Command (SOUTHCOM): It has responsibility for operations in Central and South America, which encompasses the key production and transit locations.

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<sup>7</sup>Dale E. Brown, "Drugs on the Border: The Role of the Military," *Parameters*, Winter 1991-92: 53-57.

-- Atlantic Command (LANTCOM): It has responsibility for the Caribbean, a prime corridor for drugs from South America.

-- Pacific Command (PACOM): It has responsibility for the west coast from California northward.

-- Forces Command (FORSCOM): It has responsibility for the actual territory of the United States.

-- Special Operations Command (SOCOM): It conducts a variety of missions by units such as Army Special Forces and Navy SEALS in the areas of the geographic commands.

-- North American Air Defense Command (NORAD): It provides assets such as AWACS and mobile ground radar units for air detection and interdiction missions.

In addition to these many commands, special joint task forces were established in 1989 to deal specifically with the drug war:

-- Joint Task Force 4, headquartered in Key West, Florida, covers the Caribbean.

-- Joint Task Force 5, headquartered in Alameda, California, covers the West Coast.

-- Joint Task Force 6, headquartered in Fort Bliss (El Paso), Texas, covers the land border with Mexico.

While the logic behind dividing such a large area into specific theaters is sound, making such a complex command and control system responsive to events on a real-time basis is a daunting task. In a hypothetical example, a plane laden with

drugs could take off from a clandestine strip (monitored by SOCOM) somewhere in Colombia (in SOUTHCOM's area of responsibility), fly over the Caribbean (covered by LANTCOM/JTF-4), be detected by an AWACS (from NORAD), refuel in Central America (again in SOUTHCOM's area), head north over Mexico and then either cross the border (in JTF-6's area) or swing out over the west coast (in PACOM's/JTF-5's area), and ultimately land in U.S. territory (under FORSCOM).

As difficult as effective coordination between the various military commands might be, it must be kept in mind that this is only a small part of the overall problem. There must be coordination with the relevant U.S. civilian law enforcement agencies, sometime even at the state and local level. Finally, there must be coordination between the U.S. Government and the governments of two dozen nations in the hemisphere.

In addition to the traditional areas of the geographic commands, the hemisphere has been divided into three categories regarding drugs: the production zone; the smuggling zone; and the border zone.

Production zone This area broadly inscribes the regions in South America--primarily in Peru and Bolivia but extending into surrounding areas such as Colombia and Ecuador--where coca is grown and harvested and the preliminary processing into paste and base is performed. The U.S. military first became substantially engaged in the 1980s through operations such as Blast Furnace and Snow Cap. In 1990, the United States launched a \$2.2 billion

Andean counter-narcotics initiative that included a major military component providing for both expanded U.S. participation and significant assistance to local security forces.

The U.S. military role in the region is now extensive. The United States provides Andean nations many types of military equipment, including major end items such as aircraft and helicopters, as well as the requisite training to operate and maintain them. Members of elite outfits such as the Army's Special Forces and Delta Force as well as the Navy's SEALS train police and army units in jungle warfare and riverine operations. Special "Tactical Analysis Teams" work with the DEA and the CIA to assemble intelligence dossiers on narcotics trafficking organizations. In recent operation Support Justice, a network of radars was used with some success in closing the drug cartels' northbound air corridors.<sup>8</sup>

The American military has succeeded in hampering the production of drugs, but the problems associated with this effort are exceedingly complex and possibly insurmountable in the long term. One of the central problems is the lack of political will on the part of the host governments and security forces. The economies of narcotics-producing nations have become highly dependent on drug money. Peru's coca industry accounts for approximately \$1 billion annually, compared to total legal export earnings of only \$3 billion, and employs some 15 percent of the workforce. The situation is even worse in Bolivia, where coca

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<sup>8</sup>Lane: 21.

revenues nearly equal those from all other exports combined and 20 percent of the workforce is involved in some aspect of the narcotics industry.<sup>9</sup> It is not hard to understand why leaders of those countries are reluctant to take action that would lead to severe economic dislocations (and political repercussions), particularly when they perceive of narcotics as essentially an American problem. This is all the more true in Peru, where civilian and military leaders insist that fighting drugs pushes coca-growing peasants into the arms of the *Sendero Luminoso* guerrillas.

This fundamental problem of lack of political will is compounded by countless others, such as corruption, institutional rivalries between host-nation police and military, and a Latin perception of the role of the military in society that weakens its effectiveness and produces systematic human rights abuses. While American assistance seeks to address such problems through programs focusing on administration of justice and respect for human rights, these are--at most--successful on the margins.

Smuggling zone This area extends from Colombia north into Mexico and the Caribbean. On the ground, the military provides some of the same support given to the Andean nations such as training and Tactical Assistance Teams. Many types of military aircraft, including E-3 AWACS, E-2C Hawkeyes, and P-3 Orions patrol the skies searching for drug traffickers. This surveillance augments the coverage provided by the extensive

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<sup>9</sup>Andreas: 113.

Caribbean Basin Radar Network which forms a wide arc in the region. On the seas, Navy and Coast Guard vessels have built upon the early Hat Trick operation and constantly monitor shipping and inspect suspected drug boats.

These efforts have met with respectable success in deterring drug traffickers from using traditional routes and methods. Thus far, however, traffickers have been able largely to adjust by shifting to new routes or resorting to other methods such as commercial shipping to avoid detection.

One specific problem facing the U.S. military in the smuggling zone deals with the limited ability of law enforcement agencies of host governments to react in a timely manner. One of the most difficult steps is passing over an interdiction mission to local officials. For example, U.S. military assets may detect a suspected drug plane and track it into a Latin country. They then must turn the operation over to the local authorities. Unfortunately, the security forces in these countries have little capability to respond quickly and move a unit to a clandestine airfield in time to interdict drug traffickers. Thus, even when coordination is exemplary, the prospects for apprehension of traffickers are low.

Border Zone Along America's coasts and its border with Mexico, the military has assumed a variety of roles. Military surveillance aircraft are augmented by ground radar stations and aerostat radar balloons. Light fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft and even remotely piloted vehicles patrol the border. Elements

of the Special Forces and Marine recon teams man listening posts using sophisticated equipment such as night-vision devices and long-range optics. Ground surveillance radar and remotely monitored sensors also are used along smuggling routes. Techniques developed to detect tunnels in Korea and Vietnam have been exploited to find tunnels used to smuggle drugs under the border. Even engineer units have found a role, clearing scrub brush that obscures observation and building roads to facilitate access to suspected smuggling routes. Despite these efforts, however, the drug flow across the southern border is believed to have increased in recent years as traffickers have shifted away from routes in the Caribbean.

### ***Conclusion***

The military has extensive and unmatched resources that allow it to play a useful role in counter-narcotics operations. This is a new and somewhat ambiguous mission for the military, and inevitably there have start-up problems. Overall, the Armed Forces have done a commendable job of adjusting their equipment and tactics to a mission for which they were not intended. The military is likely to improve its performance still further as it gains greater experience in counter-narcotics operations. This said, it should be recognized that the military has become engaged in a wide variety of tasks, not all of which are of equal merit. Indeed, some operations, particularly in the drug production zone, may prove to be of little enduring value. Moreover, in all the zones, the military will find itself chasing

a moving target; as soon as it becomes proficient in countering one method, traffickers will move on to another. This does not mean that there is no value in having the military engaged in the drug war. It does mean that expectations about what the military can do must be realistic. The military can complicate the life of the drug traffickers, but it cannot solve America's drug problem.